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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 006302

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA, WHA/CAR (MCISAAC), PM (LIKENS); SECDEF FOR OSD; NSC FOR SHANNON

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [MCAP](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [DR](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT MEJIA PROMISES DOMINICAN TROOPS WILL STAY IN IRAQ

REF: A) WARSAW 03803 B) DERHAM-KUBISKE TELCON 11/4/03

Classified By: DCM Lisa Kubiske, reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. President Mejia told the Ambassador of his deep concern for Dominican soldiers at risk in Iraq. After closely listening to the Ambassador's emphatic presentation on the need for continuing Dominican engagement, Mejia said that the Dominican battalion Iraq will remain in place as planned. He will host the Ambassador, DATT, MAAG chief and emboffs for in-depth discussions with the senior military on Friday, November 7. End summary.

BACKGROUND

12. (C) The battalion of 302 Dominican soldiers serving with coalition forces arrived in Iraq in August 2003 and is scheduled to rotate out on February 15, to be replaced by another battalion for an additional six months. Dominican officers visiting Warsaw announced the intention to withdraw Dominican troops (reftel).

13. (C) Secretary of the Armed Forces Soto Jimenez told MAAG chief today that Mejia had decided two weeks earlier to repatriate the troops "as soon as possible." He and his staff indicated that they had met with the President in the morning and had obtained his assent to leaving behind a contingent of liaison officers and a platoon of military police. The issue, they said, was primarily pay; they said that Mejia had been expecting the United States to cover salary and allowances for the battalion, a cost for the full year of almost USD 1 million. The Dominican officers also complained that supplies were inadequate, particularly including parkas, boots, and transportation.

14. (C) Under Dominican law, the GODR is required to pay an overseas allowance to troops serving outside the Dominican Republic. The current financial situation in the Dominican Republic has left the Military foraging for funds and unable to meet its legal obligations. To date, two allowance payments have been made to the individual soldiers. The first, approximately USD 250, was made when the soldiers departed the Dominican Republic in August (funded through a loan from a local firm regularly doing business with the military). The second, approximately USD 200, was made in mid-October when Soto Jimenez, visited his troops in Iraq. The Secretary and accompanying officers funded their own travel.

MEJIA LISTENS

15. (C) Despite a busy schedule, President Mejia agreed to receive the Ambassador and and emboffs on short notice, giving us priority over other waiting visitors. The Ambassador emphasized to the President the extent of USG support for the Dominican Republic, noting his own recent contacts with the Department, Treasury, and the White House, all of whom want to help the Dominican Republic. He stressed that the President had to reconsider his decision to bring Dominican troops back early from Iraq. There would be strong consequences if Mejia were to reconsider his pledge to support coalition rebuilding of Iraq. The Dominican presence is important to the United States and to the rest of the coalition; it is the nation's clear rejection of terrorism and a sign of support for liberty.

16. (C) Mejia said he worried that something might happen to the troops. The situation was volatile and unpredictable. The killing of even a single Dominican would be disastrous, socially and politically. The opponents in Iraq were "crazy" and targeted those trying to help the country. They were ill in spirit, like the Taliban, and thought nothing of sending suicide bombers against civilian targets.

17. (C) The Ambassador stressed the historic nature of the mission and the prestige that the Dominicans' extraordinary work was bringing to them. He appealed to the President's duty and leadership. The word of a possible withdrawal had brought immediate, strong reaction from high levels in Washington.

18. (C) After a pause, Mejia replied, "They will stay." His

expression was serious. "But think of their families. . . ." and then, "but we must assume our responsibilities." He repeated the need to assume the DR's global responsibilities. Mejia said he would so instruct the military, citing the Ambassador, and then he decided to invite the Ambassador and four staff to a working lunch with the armed forces on Friday, November 7.

¶9. (C) Mejia wound up with some acerbic remarks about the international financial institutions ("economists working in air conditioned offices have no understanding of the real conditions here"), expressed his dismay at the deterioration of the exchange rate (now 40 pesos to the dollar), and said he was very satisfied at the seizure of nearly a ton of cocaine aboard a ship from Colombia ("destroy it, I told them, get rid of it").

¶10. (C) Comment. We note that the Dominican military read-out appears to have been misleading. If one takes him at his word -- and in this instance we do -- Mejia's concern is for the exposure of the troops, and certainly for the political consequences if any are killed or wounded. Even so, financing for their operations is unsecured and of fundamental concern to the Dominican military. When the Ambassador brought the argument back to the fundamental principles -- the standing of the country within the international community and its solidarity with the war against terrorism -- Mejia did the right thing.

HERTELL